

# Why Weren't We Taught This?

by Gini Dickie

That is the question heard most frequently when teachers learn about the history of Black settlers in Grey County. For several years, the late Dr. Patrick Solomon, Professor in the Faculty of Education at York University, invited his teacher candidates to join him in attending the annual Grey County Black History Event. During the three years that I worked with Dr. Solomon as a seconded Course Director in the Urban Diversity Teacher Education Program, I helped to organize this field trip and saw the transformation in the participants' understanding of Ontario's Black History. Inevitably, someone asked, "Why didn't we learn about this when we were in school?"

After the passing of Dr. Solomon in 2008, and with no Event planned for 2010, Professor Naomi Norquay and I discussed the possibility of organizing a field trip for teachers to the Old Durham Road. A network of teachers, many of them graduates of Dr. Solomon's program, had been formed in the Greater Toronto Area, to provide mutual support in the efforts to bring an Equity, Diversity and Social Justice (EDSJ) focus to their teaching. Several of these teachers responded to our invitation to participate in a Black History Field Trip to Grey County on Sunday, May 30<sup>th</sup>, including Kishauna Evans (Grade 3 teacher at Hunter's Glen PS) who had previously attended the 2007 Event.



Naomi Norquay

"I like learning things about Canadian Black history that I don't know. As an immigrant child, it would have been nice to know just how rooted my community is in Canada. Now I can talk to my students, colleagues, and friends about it."

Four carloads of educators and children met at the Tim Horton's in Durham on that beautiful Sunday morning, and led by Naomi, we visited Priceville and made our way to the Norquay property, where we were able to explore the stone foundations of a Black settler's home.

Over a picnic lunch, the group met with local author-artist, Bonita Johnson de Matteis (a descendant of the nearby Negro Creek settlement). Bonita talked about her family's history, Black identity issues, and shared her two autobiographical children's picture books: *Going North: The Story of Geraldine's Great Great Grandfather* (The Ginger Press, 2007) and *Threads: Piecing Together the Underground Railroad* (The Ginger Press, 2008).

Sukayna Dewji, (teacher at Thorncliffe Park PS) later wrote, “It was great being in a small relaxed group where all questions were welcome.” She has recommended the trip to the Anti-Racism, Equity and Social Justice Committee of the Toronto teachers’ union (Elementary Teachers of Toronto).



Bonita Johnson de Matteis

In the afternoon, the group visited the Old Durham Road Black Pioneer Cemetery, where we were enthusiastically and warmly welcomed by members of the cemetery committee, some of whom are descendants of the Old Durham Road settlers. This was an exceptionally moving part of the trip for me, having visited the cemetery on four previous occasions. My jaw dropped when I saw the newly-installed white crosses representing those who were buried there. I had heard the stories of the missing gravestones from this cemetery in the National Film Board’s *Speakers for the Dead*, and it seemed that this powerful image of so many crosses was, indeed, speaking for these early settlers and the injustices they had faced.

Bishakha Chowdhury, also a teacher, brought her partner and children and “particularly appreciated hearing from Bonita and the people who spoke with us at the cemetery regarding their experiences and efforts.” She also said, “Clearly Naomi is well-informed and able to convey her knowledge to a very mixed-age group.”

Before we headed back to Toronto, a quick visit was made to the South Grey Museum in Flesherton where there is a permanent display of “pioneer life”, as well as a curio cabinet full of personal items donated by one of the area’s original Black families.

Looking back on the experience, Felicia Samuel (Grade 7/8 teacher at Emily Carr PS) reflected, “The reason I came on the trip was to learn more about my history. We often spend so much time examining the slave trade and the Underground Railroad, but we skim over what happened to the people once they made it into Canada. This trip made it so real for me because I was physically in the area. For students, being in a rural area with the museum and the memorial, it would help them to visualize life back then. Having the knowledgeable ‘tour guides’, and the members of the community guide and educate us made the trip an amazing experience! I can speak more confidently to my students about the Black settlements. It was a beautiful day and definitely worth the drive from Scarborough!”

Clearly, some students will now be taught what we were not. The Toronto District School Board has developed new Africentric curriculum units and the Grade 3 social studies unit on pioneers focuses on early Black settlements in Ontario, particularly Buxton and Dawn. However, I think it is safe to say that most teachers are unaware of the

settlement on the Old Durham Road, and there is much work to be done to retrieve this “hidden history” and raise awareness about it.



*Back row: Naomi Norquay, Marie Raithby, Phillip Miller, Shona Pelley, Helen Miller, Beverly Jean Daniels  
Front row: Gini Dickie, Kishauna Evans, Bishakha Chowdhury*

Naomi and I look forward to organizing another field trip in 2011.